

Rise 150

Chapter 150: Fighting for a Seat

The scene at the Hairpin Flower Banquet is somewhat retro, resembling a gathering where ministers and generals from the Spring and Autumn period or the Warring States period would invite their underlings for a feast. In the central open space, several rows of small tables were set up, around two hundred in total, each of which could seat one person. On each table, there were prepared delicacies and fruit platters, and servants moved back and forth, replenishing the dishes and collecting empty plates.

In truth, most people didn't pay much attention to the food; the main focus of the Hairpin Flower Banquet was on honor, though Zhu Ping'an was an exception.

There were many new students attending, and the venue at the examination hall was limited, so not everyone could find a seat at the rows of small tables in the center. In the more remote areas, there were several long tables, each capable of seating more than ten people, though they were not as favorable as the central ones.

After all, this was just a welcome banquet for the new students. If it were a higher-class banquet like the Lu Ming Banquet (for newly passed scholars after the provincial exam) or the Qiong Lin Banquet (for newly minted Jinshi after the palace exam), such disorganized arrangements would not have been tolerated.

The rows of small tables in the center were the best spots. Not only were they closer to the influential figures, like the examination officers, but the individual tables also gave a subtle sense of being special.

Zhu Ping'an was quite interested in the individual tables in the middle of the hall. It would be much more convenient to dine alone, without worrying about others forcing drinks upon him.

There was no fixed arrangement for who would sit at the individual tables in the center or at the long tables in the corners. It was all based on how one acted in the moment. Judging by the eager expressions on the faces around him, most seemed keen on occupying the central tables. They quickly stepped forward to claim a spot, and the scene was polite yet intense.

Though Zhu Ping'an had stood at the front of the line, only the last few individual tables in the center were still available by the time he reached them.

Zhu Ping'an stood before one of the tables, just about to sit down, when he suddenly heard a "slap" sound. A folding fan flew through the air in a parabolic arc and gently landed on the table in front of him.

Damn, to use such a method to snatch a seat in this kind of situation.

Zhu Ping'an turned around and saw a new student, unfamiliar to him but exuding a certain spoiled air. The young man was smiling and looking at him with a self-satisfied expression, as though he had already decided that Zhu Ping'an would back down in this situation. After all, in such a setting, if one didn't want to draw attention from the examination officers, they would have no choice but to concede the seat.

The spoiled student's actions only attracted the attention of a few people nearby. The small stir was nowhere near enough to catch the attention of the examination officers and other important figures at the front of the hall.

Coincidentally, among the people seated nearby were Guo Ziyu, Liu Qian, and others whom Zhu Ping'an had met during the registration the day before. They were now quite interested in watching this unfold, eager to see how Zhu Ping'an would react. If he gave in, it would make him seem weak, and with all the tables already taken, he'd have to settle for a corner seat at a long table. But if he didn't, he'd appear petty, provoke conflict, and risk drawing attention from the officials, leaving a bad impression. It was a dilemma, and the situation seemed quite amusing.

Zhu Ping'an looked at the folding fan on the table, and a slight smile curved his lips. Ignoring the fan, he casually picked it up and handed it back to the spoiled student with a silly grin.

"Brother, your fan has fallen."

His words, not too loud but clear enough for those nearby to hear, easily reversed the situation.

The spoiled student simply glared at Zhu Ping'an, took the fan, and, under the watchful eyes of the crowd, sulkily moved toward the long tables in the corner to find a seat.

As Mencius said: "A person must first insult themselves before others insult them." If you had discussed this with me in good faith, I might have yielded the seat to you. Why resort to such a method? You brought this upon yourself. Ignoring the young man's gaze, Zhu Ping'an calmly sat down at the table, picked up a slice of melon, and took a bite. It was sweet and juicy, delicious beyond words.

As everyone gradually took their seats, the Hairpin Flower Banquet began.

While Zhu Ping'an was enjoying the delicious food at the banquet, Miss Li Shu, the eldest daughter of the Li family in Shanghe Village, was also savoring her meal.

The setting was Miss Li's boudoir, where the young Miss Li Shu lazily sat at the table, one hand holding a scroll with the title "The Eight Dragons," reading while enjoying the service of her bun-carrying maid. Occasionally, her cherry-like lips parted to indulge in the delicacies the maid offered.

At this moment, Li Shu was dressed in a light pink gown that trailed on the ground. Her slender waist was bound by a cloud-colored ribbon, accentuating her delicate figure. In her hair was a seven-treasure coral hairpin, with a pearl the size of a little finger, shining brightly like snow, its starry glimmer sparkling among her hair, illuminating her delicate face. Her large eyes, dark as ink, gleamed as she read the scroll, seeming completely absorbed, as if nothing in the world could capture her attention at this moment.

"Miss, Miss, how can you still concentrate on reading? Early this morning in Shanghe Village, they were blowing pipes and drumming. They say that bad boy got first place again," the bun-carrying maid pouted while serving her, not forgetting to gossip.

"Mm," Li Shu did not shift her gaze from the scroll.

"Miss, that bad guy passed the imperial exams, and still got first place. He's been selected as a stipend student," the maid puffed her cheeks.

"He's just a useless scholar. What's there to talk about all day? Only the mud-legged people in Shanghe Village would treat him like a treasure..." Miss Li Shu pouted, her voice dripping with disdain.

"But he's only thirteen, and at thirteen, he's already a scholar, and the first one at that. They say there haven't been many like him in our Ming Dynasty," the maid, emboldened, replied, her mouth still puffed out.

"Even if he becomes something, he's still a toad, a greedy toad..." Miss Li Shu, as usual, sneered, as though in her eyes, Zhu Ping'an was nothing more than a toad.

"What if he becomes a successful scholar, or even a top scholar?" The maid glanced at her young mistress, then hesitated.

"There's no 'what if.' A toad isn't a carp. Even if it crosses the dragon gate, it's still a toad." Miss Li Shu was exceptionally dismissive.

At this moment, another maid entered, holding a dish.

The bun-carrying maid quickly picked up a piece from the newly served dish and offered it to Miss Li Shu.

Li Shu habitually pouted her cherry-like lips, then suddenly darkened her face. She waved at the maid who had just entered and, with a neutral expression, asked, "Who made this?"

"It... it was made by this servant," the maid, trembling with fear, replied.

The maid now bore a faint handprint on her face.

"Useless! After two months of learning from the high-priced chef my father hired for you, this is what you bring to fool me!"

Li Shu rubbed her slightly aching hand and looked at the kneeling maid with a cold smile.

"I'll see just how hard cooking really is..." Miss Li Shu said as she stood up, her delicate face showing anger, and walked toward the door.

"Miss, you can't go into the kitchen! If the master finds out, he'll kill me!" The bun-carrying maid, hearing her mistress's intention to learn cooking, immediately turned pale with fear, recalling how much her master pampered Miss Li. She hurriedly chased after her, calling out in a panic.